

Juan Pardo, the People of Wateree, and First Contact ^[1]

The Wateree tribe (identified by the Spanish and known also as the Guatari people) lived in an influential settlement near Trading Ford and were led by a female chief. In 1567, they encountered Spanish explorers led by Captain Juan Pardo who came through the North Carolina Piedmont with grand hopes of creating a powerful empire.

A 400-year-old secret lies undisturbed beneath the waters of the Yadkin. It is a secret about Rowan's earliest recorded history, about events that predate the county's founding by nearly two centuries. It is a secret about the first documented Christian missionary success in the Southeastern interior, indeed, in all of North America.

It is a secret about American Indian people — the Wateree, who lived in an influential settlement near Trading Ford and were led by a female chief.

It is a secret about Europeans — Spanish explorers led by Captain Juan Pardo who came through the North Carolina Piedmont with grand hopes of creating a powerful empire.

The Wateree welcomed the Spanish to their village in early February 1567. On that chilly winter day, the New World and the Old World came face to face on the banks of the Yadkin, and Rowan's documented history officially began.

The Spanish arrival in Rowan preceded that of the "Lost Colony" settlers on North Carolina's Roanoke Island by 20 years.

Go to the state archives in Raleigh, and a copy of a Spanish document from 1569 offers this description of the Rowan County area and the Yadkin River at the point of first European contact in 1567:

It is a rich land... a land of mountain ridges and flat tracks of arable land, good for all the crops of the world.... Next to this place passes a very full river.... They say that any sort of ship could sail more than 20 leagues up this river.

Pardo himself wrote of Wateree, which was the name of the people of the tribe as well as their village: "This land... is one of the good lands that exists in the world."

Such descriptions impressed Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, governor of La Florida, the sprawling Spanish colonial territory that, according to Spain, included the entire Southeast and all of the Atlantic coast. Menéndez was so taken by descriptions of Wateree that he intended it to be the site of his personal agricultural estate — a 5,500-square-mile domain promised him by the Crown.

But the Spaniards' ambitious dreams quickly withered in Southern soil. And the native tribes, beset by European-borne [epidemics](#) ^[2] of [smallpox](#) ^[3] and other diseases, faced sweeping disruptions and calamities in their ways of life. The Wateree would eventually leave the Yadkin area and ultimately take on a new identity.

Similarly, the colonial records noting the Spanish presence at Wateree became quietly submerged beneath the waters of history. Unknown in the United States for centuries, the documents would eventually be discovered — though detective work by American archaeologists would not work out an accurate route for Pardo's Southeastern expedition until the 1980s.

Four centuries after Pardo's men braved heat and cold on a 900-mile route through the Carolinas and Tennessee, the one-time village of Wateree is itself submerged — literally — beneath the waters of High Rock Lake. Archaeologists have never excavated the Wateree site — its exact location hasn't been pinpointed — though digs at Trading Ford in the 1940s did turn up intriguing hints about life for American Indian tribes in precolonial times. So, while much of the Wateree site and peoples' story is known, much remains hidden.

The secret still lies beneath the Yadkin.

Beginnings of empire

The story of the Pardo expedition begins in a most peculiar place and with a most peculiar question:

What are U.S. Marines doing playing golf?

That question can be answered by going to Parris Island, S.C. There, the Marine Corps operates not only its well-known basic training center but also its own golf course. Just past the rough at the eighth hole lies a series of trenches.

Those trenches aren't part of Marine war games, however. They're archaeological excavations, and they contain the ruins of Santa Elena, the capital city of Menéndez' La Florida.

Digging at the site began two decades ago, and over the years archaeologists have found the remnants of forts, a plaza

and a vineyard. In the 1570s, 400 people — craftsmen, bureaucrats, soldiers, slaves — lived there, struggling to re-create a self-sufficient European-style community under painfully daunting conditions.

It was from Santa Elena that Pardo and his company of 125 soldiers headed out on Dec. 1, 1566, to explore the Southeastern interior.

A "primary concern"

Over a two-year period, Pardo made two expeditions inland. He started and ended at Santa Elena and followed the same basic route: north through central South Carolina following the Catawba-Wateree River into the North Carolina Piedmont, then west into the Appalachians and back. The first expedition lasted from Dec. 1, 1566 to March 7, 1567; the second, from Sept. 1, 1567 to March 2, 1568.

Menéndez had specifically charged Pardo to head west and build a road to Zacatecas, Mexico, site of a major silver mine for the Spanish empire. The Spanish incorrectly thought they could arrive at Zacatecas after several days' travel over the Appalachians. But Pardo found it necessary to head north first, toward tribal settlements, because the expedition had to rely on American Indian tribes for food. And Pardo and his men needed plenty of energy, since they would walk the entire way without using pack animals.

"Food was a primary concern of the conquistadors," says Tim Burke, who studies Spanish colonial expeditions as part of a 16th century re-enactment group in Bradenton, Fla. "Like their counterparts in European armies, in the New World the conquistadors lived off the land, or more particularly off those who worked the land.... An army on the march could rarely afford to stop and hunt, even with the plentiful wildlife available in 16th century North America."

Spanish soldiers trekking across North America were typically issued the following ration initially, Burke says: two pounds of ship's biscuit ("what the American Civil War would call hardtack") and a pound of cheese. That might be supplemented by dried meats or fruit, or perhaps beans or peas. Documents state that Pardo's expedition took along biscuit, cheese and wine.

In short supply

After they depleted their initial stocks, Spanish explorers in the 16th century routinely demanded and extorted food from different American Indian tribes. The main items taken were corn, beans and squash.

"Meat of any kind seems to have always been in short supply," Burke says. "When they could get meat, these extremely Catholic Spaniards seem to have ignored the prohibition of eating meat on Friday."

After leaving Santa Elena, Pardo and his men first marched northward through a string of tribal settlements in South Carolina along the Catawba-Wateree River. The most influential settlement was Cofitachequi, near present-day Camden.

When the Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto had passed through South Carolina 26 years earlier, he and his men regarded Cofitachequi as one of the most memorable tribes they encountered. Blessed with stores of freshwater pearls and a city that included an impressive ceremonial mound, the settlement of Cofitachequi was then ruled by a female chief. De Soto tried unsuccessfully to take her hostage, though he did capture the chief's niece.

When Pardo's company marched through the same area in the 1560s, Cofitachequi's power was substantial but diminished from De Soto's time.

At all the tribal settlements, Pardo, following standard Spanish practice, gave a prepared speech to the members of the tribe, explaining that the Spanish emperor claimed the territories and that Christian belief would now take root in the land. Over the course of the 1500s, the [stylized](#) ^[4] ceremony in which Spanish leaders presented this *requerimiento*, or notification, became a standard scene throughout the New World, from Piedmont woodland to Peruvian mountains, from Nicaraguan jungles to Arizona desert.

Pardo also instructed the members of each tribe to build houses for later use by the Spanish and to lay up stores of corn exclusively for Spanish use.

Hostilities

Few tribes in the Carolinas acted in a threatening way toward Pardo's party. Existing documents do describe several exceptions, however.

In one instance, a group of a tribe in southern South Carolina rebelled against Spanish demands for food and canoes. While Pardo was to the north, soldiers from Santa Elena attacked the members of the tribe and [gave them no quarter](#). In another case, a [contingent](#) ^[5] of Spaniards Pardo stationed near present-day Morganton sided with one group of tribe members against their rivals and engaged in a battle. Pardo himself later withdrew from Satapo, a village in eastern Tennessee, after receiving warnings of a planned massed Indian attack. De Soto's expedition of 1539-43 had used cavalry effectively against American Indian warriors on a series of occasions. Pardo's expedition had no mounted fighters, though the soldiers were armed with crossbows and a primitive firearm called an arquebus. Pardo encouraged a positive

reception from the tribes by offering their village leaders gifts of metal tools such as axes, chisels and knives.

"Pardo was just lightly equipped and was part of a colonizing effort," says Charles Hudson, a University of Georgia archeologist who has written books on both the Pardo and De Soto expeditions.

Spanish explorers from earlier times, such as De Soto and the conquistadors Francisco Pizarro in Peru and Hernán Cortés in Mexico, had been aggressive and often ruthless. Those explorers had been "the first guys on the land," Hudson says. "They were using every sort of force they felt was legitimate, whereas Pardo was really more conciliatory [6]. He was giving out gifts and trying to build positive relationships. It was more of a diplomatic effort."

"I have no reason to think that Pardo was a nicer guy than De Soto and the others," Hudson says. "It was just that the times and the nature of what was going on were different."

It was in Pardo's interest to take a diplomatic approach in dealing with the different tribes, says Paul Hoffman, a historian at Louisiana State University who has translated the Pardo expedition documents. "I have little doubt that Pardo could have fought his way into the interior, or used De Soto-like tactics," Hoffman says, "but that would have defeated his purpose: explore and live off the land."

Maneuvering

Records do indicate that Pardo's men took a small number of American Indians from different tribes captive. So, while Pardo pursued a diplomatic approach with the native people, Hudson says, tribal leaders probably understood that behind the Spaniard's conciliatory words lay the clear possibility of coercion [7].

Throughout Pardo's expedition, in fact, the Spanish and the different tribes constantly maneuvered to maximize their influence with each other. To what extent each side shrouded its true agenda with deception is impossible to determine at a distance of four centuries.

The first tribal settlement Pardo visited in present-day North Carolina was Otari, at present-day Charlotte. The Spanish then headed north along the Catawba River and stopped at the tribal village at Yssa, near Lincolnton, in Lincoln County. "There I found many chiefs," Pardo later wrote, "and a great number of Indians to whom I made the customary speech and they remained under the dominion of His Holiness and of His Majesty."

The Spanish next turned toward the mountains. At the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, they camped at Joara, a tribal settlement at an important crossroads north of present-day Morganton. Pardo could see that snow had fallen on the mountains, so he decided against trying to press westward. The Spanish built a small fort, which they christened Fort San Juan.

Pardo left a garrison of 30 men under the command of Sergeant Hernando Moyano de Morales.

"A very full river"

Turning eastward amid the winter chill, Pardo and his entourage [8] re-entered the Piedmont and stayed briefly at villages at Guaquiri (Hickory) and Quinahaqui (Catawba), where Pardo gave his usual presentation to the chiefs of the tribes.

To cross the Catawba River, the Spanish may have used canoes confiscated from different tribes instead of trying to ford it. In any case, the Spanish, numbering about 95 soldiers, entered what is now western Rowan County and proceeded toward the Yadkin.

In early February 1567, Pardo arrived at Wateree. For the first time, the waters of the Yadkin gleamed before him.

"It is a good land," recorded Pardo's notary for the second expedition, Juan de la Bandera. "Good houses and humble, round huts as well as very large and very good huts are to be found in all the settlements.... Next to this place passes a very full river." A female chief identified by the Spanish as Guatari Mico held power in the settlement — the first time Pardo had encountered a female leader among the American Indian tribes. Guatari Mico was said to have 39 chiefs subservient [9] to her.

The various tribes and people, including local leaders, turned out at Wateree in impressive numbers. More than 30 chiefs, headed by Guatari Mico, assembled at the river settlement to greet the Spanish travelers.

One of those lesser chiefs, Orata Chiquini, was a woman. The Spanish used the terms *scacique*, *mico* and *orata* to describe various kinds of chiefs they encountered on their travels.

Pardo and his men stayed at Wateree for 15 or 16 days. The settlement was the easternmost point the expedition visited in North Carolina. Pardo ended his visit when a messenger from Santa Elena arrived and said Pardo needed to return to the capital. Menéndez feared the French would retaliate [10] for the Spanish slaughter of French Protestant settlers on the Florida coast, and he wanted Pardo's men to provide military reinforcements.

Before Pardo left, he directed that his chaplain, Father Sebastian Montero, alay missionary, remain at Wateree to instruct members of American Indian tribes in Christian teachings. Four soldiers also remained with Montero, who was later

described as tireless in his religious duties among the American Indian people.

Visit by chiefs

Pardo arrived in Santa Elena in March 1567, about a month after leaving Wateree. Six months later, at Menéndez' order, he led a second expedition into the interior. His train of about 120 soldiers followed the same basic route he'd used before.

While Pardo was in Otari on his second journey, Guatari Mico and Orata Chiquini, the two female chiefs he'd met earlier, visited him, accompanied by two of the soldiers he'd left in Wateree. As translated by Guillermo Rufin, a captured Frenchman who served as translator for Pardo, the two *cacicas* said that with the aid of the 39 subsidiary chiefs a wooden house had been built in Wateree for the Spanish, as Pardo had commanded the previous winter. The Wateree had also filled two storerooms with corn for the Spanish, they said.

The *cacicas* signaled their obedience to the Spanish Crown by saying a word, "Yaa." This word was commonly used among Southeastern chiefs to publicly express subservience to the Spanish emperor or to a superior chief. Pardo presented the two female leaders with an axe as a gift.

In late 1567, Pardo made his second visit to the Rowan area. On Dec. 14, according to Bandera's account, Pardo and his men camped in an "uninhabited place" probably near the present Rowan-Iredell county line. The next day they arrived at Wateree.

Building a fort

The Spanish commander "was well received by the *cacicas* of the place," Bandera wrote. "As soon as he arrived, he treated with the *cacicas* through Guillermo Rufin, interpreter, that they should command to come to the village all the *caciques*, their *vassals* ^[11], so that they could help him build a fort... The *cacicas* made the 'Yaa,' letting it be understood that they were very content to do it thus."

On Dec. 16, several chiefs arrived, though they did not appear until late in the morning. Pardo gave many of them a variety of metal tools as well as necklaces, mirrors and red *taffeta* ^[12], all of which pleased them. Initial construction work on the fort lasted five days. Pardo had the work proceed quickly in case he was called back to Santa Elena.

When no summons from the capital arrived, Pardo ordered that more substantial work be done on the fort. The American Indian people and Spanish built four tall corner structures of thick wood and dirt, Bandera records. The Spanish and American Indians also constructed high walls made of poles and dirt; this was the same *wattle and daub* ^[13] method some tribes of American Indian people used to make their houses. Construction of the fort was completed on Jan. 6, 1568.

Pardo named the structure Fort Santiago, after the patron saint of Spain. He designated a corporal, Lucas de Canizares, to command a group of 16 soldiers at the fort. Canizares took a formal oath to have the soldiers treat the American Indian people well, which Menéndez had made a particular priority for Pardo's second expedition.

Pardo also gave the American Indian settlement a new name: Salamanca, after a Spanish city that housed the country's most prestigious university.

With the fort established, Pardo, accompanied by about 63 soldiers, took leave of Wateree for the final time. Bandera's account is straightforward: "On Jan. 7, 1568 ... the captain, Juan Pardo, with his company continuing his return departed on this day from the city of Salamanca which in Indian language is called Guatari, returning toward Aracushi," a settlement in northern South Carolina.

Ten days after leaving Wateree, Pardo had occasion to see the Yadkin-Pee Dee River a second time. Taking a detour from their basic route, he and his men visited Ylasi, an American Indian settlement near present-day Cheraw, S.C., just south of the state line. The Yadkin-Pee Dee flows nearby. The documents give no indication that the Spanish realized it was the same river they'd known at Wateree.

Traces

"If the people of the Southeastern chiefdoms had built stone houses that could have survived the centuries," archaeologist Charles Hudson writes, "their place in the history of the early South might not have evaded scholars for so long. But the building materials of the Southeastern chiefdoms were impermanent: earth, wood, cane, bark, *thatch* ^[14] and clay."

So it is with Wateree, the American Indian village now known to be Rowan's earliest recorded settlement. The "very large and very good huts" described by Bandera in the 1560s have long since crumbled and returned to the earth.

The jewelry that Guatari Mico and Orata Chiquini likely wore, the axes, chisels and mirrors that Pardo distributed to the chiefs at Wateree— all remain undiscovered.

Lost, too, is the sizeable inventory of ammunition left at Fort Santiago — some 51 pounds of lead balls for the soldiers' guns.

Even the word “Guatari (or Wateree),” symbol of a once-proud people, has lost all meaning for residents of Rowan.

Miles to the west of Rowan, at the foot of the Blue Ridge, archaeologists are now exploring the former settlement of Joara — in 1567 the site of Fort San Juan, today a farm owned by Pat and James Berry. Over the past decade, digs at the Berry site have revealed the largest group of Spanish artifacts in the Southeastern interior. At the site of Wateree, however, the waters of High Rock Lake quietly blanket the area, barring scientists from entry.

Beneath the surface of the Yadkin, the “very full river” where Spanish explorers and the people of the Wateree tribe first met four centuries ago, a mystery lingers.

The waters of the Yadkin continue to move forward, and they still hold onto their secret.

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